

News Pitch

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 09, 2023

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Choosing Hospice Care

TTUHSC Expert Discusses Option to Help Patients and Families Facing End-of-Life Issues

Former President Jimmy Carter's decision to begin hospice care at his home has brought renewed attention to this specialized kind of medical care. Kelly Klein, M.D., Texas Tech Physicians family medicine doctor and program director for the Hospice and Palliative Medicine Fellowship Program at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC), said there are common misconceptions about what this interdisciplinary team approach to end-of-life care entails.

"Many people assume hospice means the patient doesn't receive medications or medical care and is just left to die," Klein said. "That's not the case. Hospice is a subset of palliative care. Doctors, nurses, social workers and chaplains work together with the patient and family members to address the physical, emotional and social needs throughout the remaining time the patient has left to live. It's shared decision-making about the patient's care across the spectrum."

Klein shared more facts about hospice care:

- Hospice care aims to provide comfort and improve the quality of life for patients who generally have a life expectancy of six months or less.
- It's always hard for physicians to accurately predict how long a patient will live, so they ask, "Would you be surprised if this person died within a year?" If the answer is, "No," hospice is probably a good idea.
- Other signs hospice is the best option may include the patient losing weight, having multiple hospitalizations or trips to the emergency room, and being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer or other terminal disease.
- People often wait too long to decide to begin hospice care to receive its full potential benefits. The more time the hospice care team has to get to know the patient, their unique needs and circumstances, the better providers can help improve the patient's quality of life up until the end.

The modern hospice movement that had started in Europe was still new in the United States during President Carter's administration in the late 1970s. "That was a time when end-of-life care thinking began changing," Klein said. "People are gaining awareness now because former President Carter's taking part in hospice care and has made that public. He's bringing positive attention to such a laudable thing."